

IDAHO SPOKESMAN REVIEW

Vocational skills seen as vital part of curriculum; North Idaho residents hear of success in Nampa School District

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Employers, educators and politicians who say North Idaho residents need better access to vocational and technical training gathered Tuesday to hear about successful efforts in a southern Idaho community.

Stan Bastian, the professional-technical education coordinator for the Nampa School District, spoke about state and federal funding resources available to support high school elective programs, such as those that introduce teens to medical lab work and welding. He emphasized the importance of having an industry advisory committee to help shape the curriculum.

Bastian underscored the need to begin offering these options in high school so students can transition easier into post-secondary training. And, said Jewels Carpenter, a Nampa instructor, students can earn certification in various fields, learn practical skills and supply a need in the community.

In Nampa, each high school has a specific focus, such as health occupations or auto mechanics. The challenges include retaining instructors who come from industry, the students' maturity levels and scheduling the classes, said Carpenter.

North Idaho students can get vocational training at Riverbend Professional Technical Academy in Post Falls. But the travel time deters many who would otherwise attend, said Coeur d'Alene High School Principal Steve Casey.

High school students can also take vocational classes at North Idaho College and earn dual credit. But the class selection is limited.

After the meeting, Casey pondered options, such as adjusting schedules so students don't have to drive to Riverbend so often or building a closer facility to offer classes.

"I think it would fill a huge need for a lot of our kids," Casey said.

It would fill a huge need for local industry, too, business leaders said Tuesday.

"We need to supply the businesses that are in the community," said Angela Alexander, the president of the Post Falls Chamber of Commerce. "For a long time, we haven't listened to them."

For instance, Alexander said, resort managers are needed as the tourist industry grows.

Ron Nilson agrees. He is a member of the North Idaho Manufacturing Consortium, which organized the meeting.

Nilson attributed the shortage, in part, to a lack of respect for blue-collar jobs.

Educators need to do what's best for students, Nilson said, whether that's preparing them for four years of college, or for vocational and technical training.

"This is a system that is failing our kids," Nilson said. "I'm the poster child for this."

He flunked out of college but excelled in focused, skilled training and is now the president of Ground Force Manufacturing in Post Falls.

Nilson said the community should not depend on the community college to provide the needed courses because it has a competing goal to increase academics. Instead, he said, the community needs to develop a program at the high school level.

North Idaho College spokesman Kent Propst agreed.

"It's always difficult to be all things to all people with a limited budget," Propst said.

The college receives less money from the state for both academic and professional-technical programs, he said. Still, Propst said, the need for more vocational opportunities in the community is "absolutely legitimate" and needs to be addressed.

"It's going to take a commitment from more than public schools and North Idaho College to do that."